



Online Learning and Teaching: Managing the Experience of Online Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The declining standard of English is obvious at tertiary level in most local federally-funded universities in Malaysia. This worsening condition of the target language among varsity students is quite noticeable. This would definitely bring certain impact on companies' attitudes of hiring today's graduates, as they are not competent users of the language.

As students need opportunities to practise the target language, the Internet use in teaching English for Specific Purpose (ESP) should be encouraged among education providers and educators. The network of networks, the Internet, is seen as a new learning tool in providing rich experiential active learning and opportunities to practise the target language. This computer-mediated communication (CMC) tool is versatile not only in assisting them to be competent users but also in providing employable skills for more challenging jobs in the new millennium. As resourceful tool, the Internet can be fully "exploited" in producing graduates who are knowledgeable and computer-literate. To be good language learners, the use of online teaching of English can boost students' morale and provide opportunities for them to learn the language integratively.

This paper is a small-scale research investigating students' use of a free web-based learning in language teaching. This paper looks at how a group of students develop to become competent users of ESP at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The paper also looks at the perceptions, knowledge and skills of the students involved after getting the exposure of online learning for a semester. The findings indicate that there is a large significant increase of language production, written and spoken language, among students engaging on the use of the language via computers. The study indicates a strong increase between traditional classroom teaching and online teaching. Besides, students' morale and motivation and motivation of learning the language is also discussed as the results of the online learning and teaching of English.

INTRODUCTION

English language is a global language that is spoken worldwide. This does not mean that other languages are of no significance. As defined by Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1973), language is a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gesture, or marks having understood meanings.

Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) is a management-based university that requires students to pass the required language programs. Despite passing the test of English language, not many students are competent users of the English language. The time spent for language teaching decreases gradually as students' having to take more courses to fulfill the requirement of a basic degree. In compensating the lack of practice of the target language, online learning is seen to be very useful programs to expose and make non-native competent users of the language.

BACKGROUND

UUM is located at the northern region of Malaysia, neighbouring southern Thailand. Its library received the Malaysia Super Corridor (MSC) status and the ISO 9002 in 1996. UUM with its new Vice Chancellor is persuading all staff members of the university to make UUM a world-class university and the centre for excellence by the year 2005. As Malaysia is still left behind in many aspects even though the Internet has spread all over the world. The online programs at UUM are not well received yet as issues of hardware, software and telecommunications have not been resolved for an online course to run smoothly at UUM. Online courses are still new in UUM.

In the United States, there over 6,000 accredited courses on the Web and there are more companies providing online programs for students to improve their education (Becker, Gary S. (1999). UUM as an active centre for excellence would have to compete against other nations in offering courses online.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Undoubtedly, online learning is a revolutionary classroom in the 21st century. More organizations and institutions of higher learning spend lots of money to equip themselves by preparing powerful communications lines so as to benefit from the Internet. The Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) have played a significant role in providing various and numerous courses.

There are many Internet users. Till present, the United States colleges and universities offer over 6,000 accredited courses on the Web. Some students could customize their learning and complete their degrees online by choosing courses offered by different colleges located all over the U.S. and in other countries. Clearly, physical proximity between schools is not necessary for their online cooperation. Meanwhile, partnership and management between one or more companies are deemed necessary as more profit-driven companies have begun to offer online instruction in numerous subjects and establish links with educational organizations. To gain faster acceptability and recognition, some of these companies have entered into cooperative arrangements with accredited colleges and universities.

The use of online learning has shown tremendous improvement over the attitude, knowledge and skills of students engaged in that mode. In the United States, many online learning programs are available for students. The program such as the one produced by Computer Curriculum Corporation (CCC), allows for the remote delivery of customized skills education. It offers about 9,000 learning activities for adult learners. The online coursework is designed to offer courses for self-development.

The increasing number of hardware and software aware has contributed in some way especially in motivating students to take courses online. Bialo and Sivin-Kachala (1996) report that students' attitudes toward self and toward learning improved significantly. The studies also reveal that students feel more successful in school are more motivated to learn and have increased self confidence and self esteem when using CAI.

The introduction of the Internet or web-based learning classrooms may overcome learning difficulties faced by learners due to distance. The growth of the Internet may revolutionize this system by allowing "distance learning," in which teachers and students interact closely even though they are separated both physically and in time (Becker, 99). In another study by the Center for Applied Special Technology (1996), it is shown that there are "significantly higher scores on measures of information management, communication, and presentation of ideas for experimental groups with on-line access than for control groups with no access." Online programs give control to learners to engage in the classroom at their own pace. They may proceed and spend more time outside the classrooms. Nonetheless, students are better at learning when fun is involved (Bialo and Sivin-Kachala, 1996).

The WWW has offered learners the opportunities that to have "more control over their own learning, to think analytically and critically, and to work collaboratively (Kosakowski, John, 1998). Students through web-base learning or online could become better at information seekers as there are many opportunities that allow independent and discovery learning, library research, communication skills. As the students use computers regularly, online programs would educate them to become effective information seekers. Students through computer-mediated communication (CMC) would be able to become better users of computers. However, the online learning has its impediments. This study is to find out what are the perceptions, benefits, and challenges faced by learners if online programs are to be implemented fully. Suggestions and guidelines for conducting online courses, focusing on the online Business English taught to the students of UUM, majoring in business, management, economics and finance.

SAMPLE

There are 100 students engage in the online course, Business English (course code, BB2012). They are asked to log in to join an existing classroom. The site is initially designed to supplement the course as it consists of materials for communicative practice. Students involved in this study are all in their second year (sophomore). Students are asked to provide comment(s) on the course and classroom and to reply to discussion topics or documents online.

Students are not involved to evaluation the websites. However, their participation is based on the lengthy and frequent discussions they engage asynchronously (not in real time). Their perceptions of learning online and how the online course had contributed to their learning of the language experiences are also carried out.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Students are asked to join the online classroom individually. Students are asked to reply to a welcoming message to indicate that have all received the message sent by their instructor. Prior to logging on into their classroom online, a survey (see **Table 1**) on their familiarity is distributed. After the survey, students are interviewed and asked to write their comment(s) online and participate in classrooms online. Periodic assessment of students is held twice: formative and summative. Formative assessment of the online course after two weeks of engaging on the classroom online. Summative assessment is held at the end of the semester in which the students are has not been resolved yet, it is important asked to comment on their perceptions, knowledge, and skills gained after taking the course online for a semester.

FINDINGS

This study is to find out how much benefits the students in Business English have gained from the online program via the Internet. Since the problem of telecommunications to find out about their perceptions towards online learning.

As students usually engage in their mother tongue after the English classes, the online course may provide offer that allow students to practice their global language of trade and commerce, English.

Table 1: Students' Responses on the Familiarity with the Internet

	Familiarity	Yes 1	2	3 (%)	No 4
1	I am familiar with hardware of a computer.	1 (0)	2 (20)	3 (20)	4 (60)
2	I am familiar with software of a computer.	1 (15)	2 (25)	3 (60)	4 (0)
3	I am familiar with word-processing.	1 (60)	2 (40)	3 (0)	4 (0)
4	I am familiar with the Internet.	1 (0)	2 (15)	3 (25)	4 (60)
5	I am familiar with electronic mail.	1 (0)	2 (15)	3 (25)	4 (60)
6	I am familiar with listservs.	1 (0)	2 (0)	3 (0)	4 (100)
7	I am familiar news group.	1 (0)	2 (0)	3 (0)	4 (100)
8	I am familiar with bulletin boards.	1 (0)	2 (0)	3 (0)	4 (100)
9	I am familiar with chatting through IRC.	1 (70)	2 (20)	3 (10)	4 (0)
10	I am familiar with sending attachments.	1 (0)	2 (0)	3 (0)	4 (100)

In the first survey on familiarity, most of them (60%) are not that familiar of hardware and software of computers. Most of them (60%) have basic typing skills and know how to use keyboards.

They have some basic skills of using the Internet such as the World Wide Web. About 60% are familiar with electronic mail and the Internet. Their familiarity with the Internet is an advantage to introduce online course at early stage. They could certainly get better as more time is spent browsing and surfing the World Wide Web.

None of them (100%) are familiar with listservs, news group, and bulletin boards. Regarding chatting, 70% of them are familiar with Internet Relay Chat (IRC). However, none of them know how to send attachment using e-mail. Even though 60% of them do use e-mail, they do not know some other capabilities of email.

Table 2: Perceptions, Knowledge and Skills of the Students toward Online Web-based Learning

	Perceptions, Knowledge, & Skills <i>Questions 1 – 4, Questions 5 – 8 & Questions 9 – 12</i>	No				Yes	
		1	2	3	4	frequency (%)	
1	I like the new way of learning English now.	1 (10)	2 (10)	3 (80)	4 (0)		
2	I am comfortable with online classroom now.	1 (0)	2 (0)	3 (15)	4 (85)		
3	I am comfortable with the Internet now.	1 (0)	2 (10)	3 (90)	4 (0)		
4	I am getting better at using electronic mail now.	1 (0)	2 (0)	3 (18)	4 (82)		
5	I am comfortable using the Internet to do my work.	1 (0)	2 (10)	3 (9)	4 (81)		
6	I am comfortable in writing short sentences online now.	1 (0)	2 (0)	3 (10)	4 (80)		
7	I am comfortable in writing long comments online now.	1 (0)	2 (5)	3 (5)	4 (90)		
8	I know where to find my attachment files are now.	1 (0)	2 (0)	3 (15)	4 (85)		
9	I am able to teach others to use the Internet now.	1 (0)	2 (10)	3 (10)	4 (80)		
10	I am able to save text message into another format now.	1 (0)	2 (10)	3 (10)	4 (80)		
11	I am comfortable in writing comments now.	1 (0)	2 (10)	3 (10)	4 (80)		
12	I know how to send attachments now.	1 (0)	2 (20)	3 (25)	4 (55)		

Based on the survey on perception, knowledge and skills given at the end of the semester, there has been positive perceptions towards the online programs. They have better confidence in using the online course. The familiarity of electronic mail gets better as more training is imposed later on.

On the skills, they are confident to teach others who need help. They are able to save the text into different format if needed. Students also felt that they produce longer sentences as they are familiar with the online program. Furthermore, they are better at giving comments. Despite familiarity with email, about 55% know how to use attachment. Only 44% are not familiar with sending file using attachments. Overall, it is positive for students to practise their English. The perceptions, knowledge and skills they have gained could indicate the need for the change of delivery style of instructors. Students would gain a lot of things if they are supplementary and complementary materials that could give them extra help in learning.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The use of computer in helping children learn has long been heard. Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow (Dwyer, 1994), reports that students:

- ✓ Explored and represented information dynamically and in many forms
- ✓ Became socially aware and more confident
- ✓ Communicated effectively about complex processes
- ✓ Became independent learners and self-starters
- ✓ Worked well collaboratively new their areas of expertise and shared expertise
- ✓ spontaneously and
- ✓ Used technology routinely and appropriately. Another effort called the Buddy Project

- ✓ (Indiana's Fourth Grade, 1990) supplied students with home computers and modem access to school. Positive effects included:
- ✓ An increase in writing skills
- ✓ Better understanding and broader view of math
- ✓ Ability to teach others, and
- ✓ Greater problem solving and critical thinking skills.

A lot of improvements could be made in producing better online learning. There are as follow (Dwyer, 1994):

1. instructional format, including transferring classroom activities to online activities without affecting students' concentration, motivation, thought, mastery, and comprehension;
2. methods of instruction, including developing an online learning environment that promotes student participation and applying teaching styles to electronic instruction in order to accommodate different student learning styles;
3. methods of interactions, including maintaining students' frequent and consistent involvement, encouraging student cooperation and collaboration, and applying a variety of interaction methods;
4. methods of communication, including incorporating visual, verbal, and non-verbal communication into online teaching materials;
5. instructional media, including the role of technology as the disseminator of primary course information;
6. participants, including instructors, students, and guest speakers; and
7. team work, including the importance of faculty, support staff, administrators, and policy makers. (DLS)

Downs et al. (1999) provides advice on the importance of using instructional design model to create websites. They present a model for the design of Web-based instruction that includes these phases: **analyze, design, develop, disseminate, and evaluate/revise.**

Educators and technology consultants engaged in smart partnership may benefit students and the staff. They need to have mutual collaboration if both want to benefit from the partnership. For instance, the University of Houston-Downtown (Texas), professors with the assistance of learning technology consultants in the Technology Teaching and Learning Center (TTLC) have been proactive in using more high-risk World Wide Web technologies in their courses. Teachers would certainly benefit a lot from the partnership if they are willing to accept new ideas and constructive criticisms for better improvement.

CONCLUSION

Educators should take advantage of the Internet as it offers various tools of information search and communicative tools such as the WWW and chat-rooms for students to practice their target language. As Malaysia steps into the next millennium, training of teachers in using integrating computers into the curriculum and creating online classrooms is considered timely.

In order for online classrooms to be used worldwide, there has to be serious efforts to equip schools with current technologies for learners to benefit from this new revolution of technology. The California Educational Technology Initiative (CETI) for California State Universities, for instance, proposes a revenue partnership with a private consortium to finance educational technology that involves four billion dollars in ten years. It is also predicted that as more people engage in distance learning or online programs, universities that are not well equipped will not be competitive enough to prepare learners that meet the labor market. Due to the high cost involved in pursuing education, online courses would be a cost-effective means of meeting instructional demand.

The online courses may open up more opportunities for adults wanting to be educated. Distance education programs that offer online instruction delivered via telecommunications and videoconferencing would encourage more people to be educated as there is a demand in hiring people with technology skills and knowledge.

With much flexibility, one can engage into the classroom and learn whenever and anytime regardless of the distance between the source of education and the receivers of knowledge. The training aspects of online programs should always be assessed to ensure the quality online programs.

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